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Talking Punks

Please Kill Me does for the Ramones what the disciples did for Jesus

BY JOHN McCORMICK

One who has not known life before the revolution doesn't know the sweetness of living.

—Talleyrand

The mid-'70s: I can't tell you how bad it was. It was a musical wasteland. As a friend observed, "You know rock music is in trouble when you climb into the car and your mom is humming 'Band on the Run.'" What once was rebel music had been co-opted by dope-addled studio musicians. The result was enervating rock polishing. Think Eagles.

But then came punk. Suddenly rock was restored to all its raucous glory: powerful, subversive music made by people you could respect: dope-addled non-musicians. For a few years there was a God. And gobbing.

Now, just when you thought it was safe to grow comatose, the resurrected Sex Pistols are fat, 40 and back on the road, and a knockout chronicle of the punk era appears: *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* by Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain. Even if you have no interest in the evolution of punk, I recommend this book. It's this summer's best sordid read. There's more gossip, sex and drugs in *Please Kill Me* than in any book published to date about the Clinton administration.

PLEASE KILL ME
The Uncensored Oral History of Punk
By LEGS McNEIL and GILLIAN McCAIN
Grove Press
424 pages;
$25 hardcover

Like Jean Stein's *Edie*, *Please Kill Me* tells its story exclusively via quotes. Those quoted represent a broad sample of punk rock's Who's Who: Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, Patti Smith, William S. Burroughs, Malcolm McLaren and onward. The authors have also done an incredible job of unearthing observations from scores of eyewitnesses: record-company executives, scenesters, groupies. And without fail, whether the speaker is famous or unknown, the material is the stuff dream interviews are made of: candid, explicit, hilarious, mean-spirited, compelling, defamatory and always revelatory.

Once you get past the sensationalist aspect of the book — and there's enough grist for even the most jaded mill (Lou Reed's alleged taste for coprophilia, Page 97; ditto Sid Vicious', Page 329) — you come away with portraits of people that are as detailed and fascinating as what you'd expect to find in great fiction. The oral-history format makes the story multidimensional, allowing us to see punk history from a number of different perspectives. It's roughly equivalent to what Matthew, Mark, Luke and John do in the Gospels, but because *Please Kill Me* is all quotes, it's much more readable than the New Testament. Take, for example, these random excerpts about the Iggster:

Scott Asheton: Iggy had shaved off his eyebrows. We had a friend named Jim Pop who had a nervous condition and had lost all his hair, including his eyebrows. So when Iggy shaved his eyebrows we started calling him Pop.

Iggy Pop: All I liked to do was walk around the streets with a heart full of napalm. I always thought "Heart Full of Soul" was a good song so I thought, What's my heart full of? I decided it was basically full of napalm.

On a microscopic level, the book seems to be a series of startling revelations. We hear how, following the death of his son, Burroughs started hanging out with a group of Boulder, Colorado, punks and using heroin again. And how Sid Vicious may not have been Nancy Spungen's murderer, as there was an unaccounted-for Tuinal dealer on the scene at the time of the slaying. From the macro-view, the book does an incredible job of placing punk in the context of a time and place.

McNeil and McCain make a strong argument for the idea that punk wasn't built in a day. Though the scene really erupted circa 1975-76, the authors start their story 10 years before the word *punk* ever had any musical connotation — before McNeil himself inadvertently coined the term when he suggested it as the name for the influential fanzine he helped found in 1975. Using the 1965 Velvet Underground as a jumping-off point, McNeil and McCain meticulously chart a musical/cultural development that makes its way from New York to Detroit (MC5, the Stooges), then back to New York (New York Dolls, Patti Smith, the Ramones) before making its way to England (the Sex Pistols). It's a compelling journey, because you can readily see how each subsequent twist adds another key element to the mix. Whether it's Iggy's antagonistic attitude toward his audience or the relentless buzz-saw momentum of a Ramones set, the raw ingredients all ultimately added up to an explosion that blew rock out of the convalescent hospital.

In addition to exploring the evolution of the music, *Please Kill Me* also does a good job of laying to rest the popular misconception that punk was born in the U.K. As McNeil puts it, "What the fuck was Malcolm McLaren doing hanging out, managing the New York Dolls, and watching Richard Hell at CBGB's? But you couldn't compete with those images of safety pins and spiked hair."

Since *Please Kill Me* runs 424 pages, it's hard to argue that this incredible tome should have been longer. Still, McNeil and McCain don't ever touch on the huge resurgence of punk that took place in Southern California during the late '70s. That subject alone could certainly fill another book. And there are times when an index would have come in handy — you know, what page did David Bowie screw Sable Starr on? — but the authors probably didn't want to make it any easier for litigators. To its credit, *Please Kill Me* does contain a 14-page "Cast of Characters" at its close, which identifies all the key players. There are some questionable entries in this section (Mick Jones is listed as the bass player of the Clash), but it's still an effective means of keeping track of who's who. (Incidentally, the title of the book came from a T-shirt designed by Richard Hell, which had a bull's-eye on it along with the words *Please Kill Me*.)

With the millennium fast approaching, one looks at music and wonders if old age has once again begun to congest rock's vital signs. One can only hope that *Please Kill Me* is read and taken to heart by the next generation with no future. ◻

The Joy of Riffing

Camden Joy's work presents itself as rock criticism, but reads more like some weird kind of fan mail, exploring Joy's relationship with pop music in strange, obsessive ways. As he declares in *The Greatest Record Album Ever Told* (Frank Black's *Teenager of the Year*, in case you're curious): "I am not writing this for money's sake. Please understand that if you understand nothing else. I am writing this because I have just this one free night to deposit noise in your general direction — tonight!"

***The Greatest Record Album Ever Told* (Rag & Bone Shop/Tract Home Publications, $4) is one in a series of three pocket-size letterpress pamphlets that use rock & roll as a jumping-off point for . . . well, whatever pops into Camden Joy's head. Joy argues, for instance, that Richard Nixon was responsible for the invention of rock because "the stifling political occurrences of the sixties and seventies . . . repeatedly foisted new significances and purposes upon rock and roll." In the second, *The Greatest Record Album Singer That Ever Was*, Joy uses his fixation on Al Green to spin off some of the oddest theories of race and culture I've ever read. As such, Joy's choice of album or singer seems largely beside the point, except to initiate the torrent of thoughts from his mind.**

Joy's gonzo prose has been compared with that of Lester Bangs, but I'd say Richard Meltzer is a more appropriate analogue — the Meltzer of *The Aesthetics of Rock*. Like him, Joy is part passion and part put-on, working in an elevated, ecstatic style that hints at his engagement even as it allows for a certain ironic distance. Does Joy really consider Al Green his "black father," or think *Teenager of the Year* tells the story of our lives? I'm still not sure. But his books reflect the fetishistic attraction rock music holds for so many of us, which alone makes them worth a look.

—David Ulin

Books

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